Volume 19 Issue 36
Originally issued as A9



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 19 Issue 9 Version 1.0 Year 2019
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Traversing the Desert: Fascination and Fear in Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990)

By Tarik Bouguerba
Ibn Tofail University

Introduction- This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990). This filmic production offers a critical examination of the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) offers a rather different narrative mode drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist model of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) constitutes such a narrative mode that embraces this denigrating and demeaning system of representation. Such a system, I would say, explains how this Hollywood power to represent Morocco could very well nourish the ideological power to dominate and subsequently produce Morocco according to global standards.

GJHSS-A Classification: *FOR Code: 380199*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2019. Tarik Bouguerba. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Traversing the Desert: Fascination and Fear in Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990)

Tarik Bouguerba

Introduction

This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990). This filmic production offers a critical examination of the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) offers a rather different narrative mode drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist model of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) constitutes such a narrative mode that embraces this denigrating and demeaning system of representation. Such a system, I would say, explains how this Hollywood power to represent Morocco could very well nourish the ideological power to dominate and subsequently produce Morocco according to global standards.

Written in 1947 and 1948, *The Sheltering Sky* is Paul Bowles's first book.[1] The novel was a best seller in early 1950. Bowles's piece "is intricately part of that moment when the United States is coming to terms with itself as a global power.[2]The movie I would be reading in this section states the backbone of a model of American relationship with the Oriental, and more specifically the Moroccan. At this stage, I would argue that Bernardo Bertolucci's filmic version of Bowles's novel articulates the ideals of Henry Luce's 'the American Century'. Bowles, in particular, "was writing in the wake of one of the most influential American narratives about the foreign". [3] In short, Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* translates awkwardly the Oriental as foreign, adding up a new chapter to Hollywood's cultural engagement in the process of orientalising the other as well as to its political commitment to silence this alien creature.

Bertolucci's film production of *The Sheltering Sky* follows a love triangle unravelling miraculously in the desert. Although of a mode of narration that should have been dedicated to narrate Morocco and Moroccan life, the movie seems instead to trace the American plot. *The Sheltering Sky* works out this denigrating narrative technique in the way it celebrates the Western civilization and condemns Moorish ways of life. The movie at hand also describes the potential dangers and potentialities of venturing too far from an American frame. This risk taking that is very often attributed to voyaging into Morocco in particular is indicative of how *The Sheltering Sky* is stereotypically charged. It is through its orientalist mode of narration that the movie puts the life of American citizens in jeopardy in Moorish land. Bertolucci's piece therefore depicts three Americans- Port and Kit Moresby and their friend Tunner, all constituting a love triangle.

In its nostalgia for Orientalism, *The Sheltering Sky* seems to reject American civilization in all its forms. This double-standard approach of Bertolucci's 1990 film relegates the piece into lower taste. "A strong misreading of Bowles novel', Bertolucci's is a movie that has received mixed reviews but modest box office[4] as opposed to the media coverage the novel has taken. Yet, I believe that *The Sheltering Sky*-the source text as well as its filmic adaptation- is a chapter added to the awkward Hollywood canonicity on Morocco. I would argue with Sara Mills and Denis Porter in the way that Western hegemonic discourse is heterogeneous and not homogenous or lop-sided as Edward Said claims since the opening of *The Sheltering Sky* articulates for the first time the voice of the native. It also speaks of this relationship between the American and the Moroccan. The opening scene of the movie is very significant as it uses the muezzin voice, a voice that is oriental *par excellence*, citing Koranic verses. This use of the muezzin voice is a way of acknowledging the other, its culture and its religion. It appears that Bertolucci has put himself within American Orientalism frame; it pays much attention to the native culture as much at it celebrates the American culture. At face value, the opening scene of the movie also confirms that Hollywood claims some difference in approaching the foreign from other European rigid frames. However, the movie restores in an extraordinary haste its awkward tone and precipitates in its hegemonic engagement with the other.

In his haste to fulfil this objective, Bernardo Bertolucci tries very hard to bring the native inhabitants together with the Americans into one shot. In doing so, he manages to confirm the pretext that the American discourse on the other claims some difference in

Author: Ph.D, Assistant Prof, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco.
e-mails: tarik_mahdi@yahoo.fr, tarik.bouguerba@yahoo.com

[1] See Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. (Durban and London: Duke University Press, 2005), P.87.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. PP.87,88.
[4] Ibid. PP.91,92.

© 2019 Global Journals

approaching this very other from European orientalising hegemonic frames. Dressed in white, the three American voyagers driven by their desire for voyage and adventure into the Orient are represented as explorers in the classical definition. Fascinated by Morocco, the American travellers -and Westerners in general- are willing to pay 'in blood and tears' to unveil Morocco and learn things Moroccan. Reminiscent of the first encounter between the White man and Native Americans, the encounter between the three travellers and native inhabitants draws on the same descriptive discourse in *The Sheltering Sky*. It is an encounter that revolves around the traditional orientalist cliché through which natives naively accept to serve the three American travellers and engage into a servant-master dichotomy. As if sent by God, Moroccans are employed as extras just to carry the American voyagers' luggage, submitting to the supremacy of America and accepting its presence in Morocco. Divested of their voice, no single Moroccan character is assigned a role in the plot although the last part of the movie seems to introduce the other in more flexible yet ideologically charged a mode [5]. The over-sexuality of the Oriental other is underlined in Bertolucci's opus, reducing this very other into a sexually virile creature. This reductionist approach, so to speak, summons the movie into the Orientalist genre in the way it reduces this Moroccan voice and highlights the danger that accompanies the voyage in Morocco. In brief, Bertolucci is in my view a member of this guild of Hollywood Orientalists whose major goal has always been to champion the grandeur of Americans and condemns even the idea of venturing into Morocco. The movie does also fall into representing a model of American Orientalists well-versed in Moroccan matters as 'to go native' to convince Moroccan kids to help in the baggage. Going native and using Arabic show that the American in *The Sheltering Sky* is either an anthropologist or an Orientalist. In contrast, the movie seems to have reproduced and replicated the same Orientalist clichés about Moroccans and subsequently reduced native inhabitants into 'money-mad' cultural others.

Bertolucci's *The sheltering Sky* persists in the process of orientalising Morocco in its portrayal of Moroccan women. This portrayal, in my view, draws on the fantasies the filmmaker- an American Orientalist in disguise- holds in view of Morocco. Bertolucci could hardly see native women outside the context of veiled harem. In this 1990 filmic version of Bowles's masterpiece, women "appear as shapeless bundles of black, a homogenous sea of covered women trekking silently behind their unshaven mates." [6] This classical rendition of Moroccan women feeds, in my judgment, on traditional Orientalism whereby oriental women featured in groups, divested of their identity yet identified as sexual objects. Engaged in such a reductionist representation, the movie under study seems to have awkwardly contributed to Hollywood's vilifying filmography on Morocco. Laconically yet eloquently, Bertolucci's piece decodes Hollywood's discourse and translates its approach on Moroccan women into an image of a woman in blood and flesh in her bed conquered sexually by the American traveller. She shows in this erotic scene as a speechless body but eloquent in sex, participating on her part in the process of orientalising things Moroccan. This particular scene is suggestive of that possible dialogue Bertolucci claims to uphold between the natives and Americans. This dialogue that the scene seems to communicate explains the interruption that characterizes Hollywood's rites of narration and representation of the Orient and roughly speaking Morocco.

Several are therefore the interruptions within the main plot as symptoms of that difference in point of view that distances Hollywood from European taxonomizing discourse on the other. These interruptions, I shall be reading in due course, are against the Saidian copyrighted version of Orientalism as monolithic and not heterogeneous as his critics suggest. It is claimed to be multi-faceted in the case of Bertolucci because his *The Sheltering Sky* is pregnant with examples. Hollywood's representations of the other pay as much attention to the native culture as they do to other identities. [7] Bertolucci's version seems to acknowledge, in part at least, the local colour. Throughout the movie, Ismail, Ma Haniya, Abdolwahab, Belqassim and others are for the first time mentioned by name. In the same vein, the filmmaker tries very hard to demarcate American frames of reference from Europe's denigrating discourse on the foreign when Port, Kit's husband, points out describing the other in the movie *'les Arabes sont sympathiques*'.[8] This version of the other could very muck claim to categorize the movie as a text of a heterogeneous nature. *The Sheltering Sky* proclaims that within Hollywood's mainstream cinematic discourse there always exists a moderate mode of narration. Incorporating non-translated Arabic in the scenario is indicative of this shift in 'speaking the Other'. On the other hand, Bertolucci, who was faithful to Bowles's novel, manages to bring natives together with Americans in one scene.

[5] Here, I am thinking about Abdul in Miachael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), representing Moroccans as passive characters in Hollywood and they are all assigned minor roles in the plot. *Casablanca* is a studio Hollywood film production on Morocco as stage for power relations.

[6] Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Book Review July 2003(Sage publications), P.183.

[7] This is Brian Edwards's claim which does not hold true in my argument.

[8] *The Sheltering Sky*, the movie, the French version. 'The Arabs are sympathetic'.

© 2019 Global Journals

Discussing Kit's relationship with Belqassim, the movie seems to have broken the Western tradition of rejecting any relationship between white women and Arab men. In using Belqassim in this scene, Bertolucci falls into replicating the same stereotype on the other as sexually virile and promiscuous. Kit's fascination by Belqassim's virility is but a reproduction of the same 'stock image' that has been circulating in a number of texts or films. As a case in point, Desdemona in *Othello*, the movie, is fascinated by Othello, the Moor of Venice, and is trapped in his masculinity. The story of Kit can also be read in the light of Diana and Doddi Alfayad's love story. The media coverage of this love story, I believe, reads Diana's narrative on the ground that she is fascinated by Alfayad's masculinity. In short, Bertolucci's version of these stories plays on the same rhetoric of narration and representation that portrays the Arab as lascivious.

In my reading of these interruptions or gaps in *The Sheltering Sky,* I have pointed to that possible difference in its mode of narration. Yet, I would argue that the movie, at hand, fails to dismiss this dehumanizing approach in its dealing with the Maghreb. The incorporation of non-translated passages of Arabic, for instance, does not mean that the filmmaker seeks to articulate the voice of the natives, but it is used to consecrate the image of the Other as inarticulate and awkward. These Arabic passages used in the film are pointless and meaningless. What Bertolucci tries to communicate in his film is that American representations of the foreign pays too much attention to every detail of the native culture as opposed to the classical frames of narration through which the natives are pushed towards the periphery. To illustrate, the camera of the movie examines every item of this very native culture. This is a sequence, for instance, that follows a native praying and another features a Moorish woman dancing. Other scenes are entirely dedicated to depict the nomadic nature of the native inhabitants. People live in tents, drink tea and ride camels in the desert. Other women are shot veiled and covered. Their unavailability and inaccessibility seems to reproduce the same stereotype of sameness. Put rather differently, they are not individualized that you could hardly fathom one woman from others. In addition, Bertolucci's use of the music track determines the mode of his approach; this allows some visibility- which I doubt- to things Moorish. This evokes nostalgic sentiments and confirms the exotic nature of the place. The music track elicits our tears and triggers our fears. This oriental music also determines the nature of this exotic locale through which the desert figures out as a place that could quench the occidental's fantasies on the Orient. In short, as it acknowledges the presence of the native culture, the music highlights how dangerous the adventure through the desert is.

As it claims some distance from those demeaning approaches on the Other, *The Sheltering Sky*, in my view, seems to duplicate the same fixed stereotypes inherent in the psyche of the Orientalist. Bertolucci's film production restores in an extraordinary haste its Orientalist denigrating taste in the way it justifies French colonial presence in Morocco and Algeria through those scrambled shots featuring French police. This colonial rhetoric- naturalisation- manifests in the fact that the French could licence passage to visitors.[9] When the three travellers come to Morocco, a French agent inquiring about the nature of their visit points out 'how much time are you going to spend here?' Port and his spouse would spend one year or more, a stay period that triggers the French agent's curiosity to pose one other question. 'One year, in this country?' [10] This very question foreshadows the dangerous journey that awaits the American travellers in the desert and subsequently asserts France's legitimacy to have the upper hand over Moroccan as well as over Algerian lands.

The awkward version of narrating the Maghreb and Morocco, in particular, is preserved throughout the movie to stabilize the very low image of Moroccans in Hollywood. This awkwardness in representing the foreign stems so much from a western tendency to underline the backwardness of this Oriental cultural other and highlight the rationality of the occidental. The funeral procession, as a case in point, is typically Oriental as it paraphrases the chaotic nature of the natives and emphasizes the stereotypical dimension Bertolucci holds true in his rendition of Morocco. Of similar importance, the movie's portrayal of the Other takes the stereotype further as it reproduces his image as dirty through several daunting scenes. In the second phase of the movie, several sequences translate the Moor's dirtiness into 'flies'. Children, women, old men and animals are all represented surrounded by flies. As flies are symptomatic of dirtiness in our culture, Bertolucci, in the bus-scene, taps into Port, Kit and Tunner's intimidating experience with this very Moorish attribute. Yet, their fascination mixed with fear would mead to the melodrama at the end of the movie. As they are fascinated by the desert, the American couple soon recaptures their lost love but only too late because the exotic territory would sentence him to death out of typhoid.

This tragedy, I would argue, highlights once more the danger of voyaging through the Orient and away of American frames. Bertolucci's film seems therefore to have contributed to fixing this image of the Orient as exotic dangerous locale and describe

[9] For other colonial rhetorics, see David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
[10] What follows of translations are mine.

© 2019 Global Journals

Orientals as backward and irrational. As it represents Arabs as similar, unshaven and dirty creatures, *The Sheltering Sky* calls back Iago's seminal statement that demarcates *us* the Moors as irrational and developed from *them* as rational and developed. When Port has fallen sick, Moors seem to use their magic, superstition, and exotic music to cure him. On the contrary, a French agent translating Iago's ideology that they 'work by wit and not by witchcraft' comes to Port's rescue speaking the language of science and magic. This scene in the main seems to exclude Moors from science when Kit found no Moorish doctor to help her. This exclusivist approach that Bertolucci uses asserts his tendency to vilify, dominate and produce a passive Moor, a Moor who is unable to interact in his dealing with the West.

At this stage, I would argue that Bertolucci's *The sheltering Sky* celebrates some of the ideals of Luce's concept of the American Century. The movie represents America- incarnated in Tunner, the businessman- as an economic power and underlines his heroic act at the very closing scene. If Moors failed to rescue Port and his wife and the French's attempt was aborted in cradle, Bertolucci- Bowles in disguise- kept Tunner, the epitome of American heroism, alive to save Kit his lost beloved. The economic hegemony of America manifests in the way the American embassy sent an aeroplane to take Kit, an American citizen. Equally important, the movie seems however to praise American-Moroccan relationship and condemn the French presence in Morocco. Whilst in the desert, Tunner -and not Port- stands in for the America Kit and her spouse have left behind. Thus, Bertolucci quickly recaptures this paradise-lost (America), to use John Milton, whilst voyaging through the desert.

In conclusion, I would point out that the movie, at hand, represents Port as an American anthropologist or a heir of American Orientalism as he is portrayed, oftentimes, as an observer watching over women dancing and trying to discover phases in the inner life of the Moors. Last but not least, Bertolucci, I believe, manages to translate Bowles's narrative of American mobility through a French space, highlighting the birth of America as a neo-global power. In short*, The Sheltering Sky,* as it distances itself from a French position, fails to mobilize some if not all of the tropes and conventions inherent in French colonialist discourse. Yet, the movie celebrates the spirit of American Heroism and outlives some of the ideals of the American century in the wake of a demeaning mode of narrating the Other.

© 2019 Global Journals